

The Mysterious Doctor Sciamano
and
Other Strange Tales

Raymond C. Andrews, M.D..



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The Great Western Trail in Arizona

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**The Mysterious Doctor Sciamano
and
Other Strange Tales**

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For Lisa

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The Mysterious Doctor Sciamano

I last spoke with my grandfather many years ago. He was very old and bedridden at the time due to some malady which would not respond to treatment. Since he was a famous doctor, specialists from every field came to see him, expounding diagnoses that I know today were impossible to justify. I'm sure they wanted to help him, but I also had the feeling that some of them were simply searching for fame by association, since each visit was dutifully recorded, with pictures, in the newspapers.

On that day relatives had gathered in his modest home to celebrate his ninetieth birthday, but the mood was far from festive since we knew it would be his last. Grandmother, by her laughter, questioning, and general busyness, tried to lighten the oppressive atmosphere, but was only marginally successful. She fluttered

constantly around grandfather's bed, propping his pillow, adjusting the room lights, and attending to his needs before they were apparent to the rest of us.

That afternoon, she asked me to retrieve a box from the top shelf of a kitchen cabinet. I had to remove other parcels before I could retrieve it, and sneezed at the dust that rose from it when I pulled it from the shelf. I offered the box to her, but she looked away and made no comment. I knew, though, that she wanted me to open it.

Under its crumbling cover, the fragile cardboard box contained a thick bundle of old newspapers tied together with string. They were folded every which way, and had become so brittle with age that I could not unfold them without tearing some of them. From what little I could read of the faded newsprint, they documented the story of a physician that had practiced for a short while in the small town where my grandparents lived. They alleged that he had developed magical curative powers after he moved to California, but no one knew how he had obtained them. I took the bundle to grandfather's room, placed it on his night table, and sat in the chair next to his bed.

He looked briefly at the crumbling papers, smiled recognition, and closed his gray eyes. He reopened them after a minute of slow nodding, looked at me, and threw up a hand.

“Well,” he said, “you should know what shenanigans might await you if you intend to follow through with your medical studies. I’ll tell a story you won’t believe. No one ever did.”

He picked up the pile of clippings and tried to unfold the top one. The yellowed document tore in his hands, and he tossed it on grandmother’s side of the bed.

“Well,” he said, before pausing again. The old alarm clock on his night table loudly ticked off the seconds as his mind struggled to travel fifty years into the past. He squeezed his forehead and blinked rapidly four or five times. His memory lapses had been progressing in scope and detail for months. He sometimes didn’t recognize faces of people he had known for decades, and he often forgot what he had said or done just minutes earlier. I was not optimistic he would remember much of the story contained in those yellowed documents.

“Well,” he repeated, after his mind had returned from its mysterious wanderings, “during my internship, I met this young internal

medicine resident from Yale. I had graduated from the University of Bologna, and, since our beliefs about how medicine should be taught and learned were radically different, we agreed immediately to disagree about all things medical. We did agree, however, as did many other colleagues, that his diagnostic abilities were non-existent, and his therapeutic suggestions were inappropriate.

“This doctor... charlatan ... would better describe him,” he said with a chuckle, “had a bedside manner that was unequaled by any other practitioner of the medical arts I’d ever met. He could convince a one-legged amputee that he could walk. Of course, once he tried to, he would fall flat on his face. Dr. Sciamano then would laugh sadistically, and walk away, leaving the patient on the floor for someone else to help back into bed.

“You can imagine that he was disliked by the entire staff, and by myself especially. Administration ran him off eventually, and I lost contact with him. Actually I forgot about him entirely. When he reappeared years later, rumors about his miraculous cures sprouted like daises in the spring. Some said that as a result of the training he had received during a retreat in a

monastery in Tibet, he could bring back the dead. Others swore he had worked with shamans in Africa and could even prevent death. The main stream media described him as the world's greatest doctor, touting his cures as 'miraculous,' and 'unheard of in the history of the profession.' A few on the fringe even thought he was the second son of god."

My grandfather laughed when he said that. Since he had a wry sense of humor, I imagined he was putting Dr. Sciamano through a few paces only a god could perform. I pictured him upside down on a cross, and I was sure he would have preferred that to what really happened to him.

"There was a mystery about him that I could not penetrate, and I knew him and his abilities better than most," my grandfather said. He coughed a few times to clear his throat, and my grandmother was immediately at his side, holding a glass of water.

"You're dry, Franz. Drink this now!" she ordered sternly. Grandfather took a sip, then tried to return the glass.

"All of it!" my grandmother demanded, arms akimbo. She loved him deeply, and my grandfather knew her gruffness was just an act,

but he obediently drained his glass before handing it back.

“He allegedly was able not only to treat, but to completely cure, patients that normally would have been expected to die in a day or two from their fatal diseases,” he continued while wiping away the drops of water that had dripped onto his chest. “Of course this embarrassed the physicians of those patients, some of whom were famous in their own right. They fought to defend themselves in the media, since Sciamano had brazenly and openly accused them of incompetence. None were successful, however.

“According to what I had heard, the patients’ tests, diagnoses, and treatments, proved their physicians had acted correctly. They were there for all the world to see, but the press and the public ignored them. The patients Sciamano had cured were proof enough that their specialist physicians were incompetent.

“The prole love scandals and rarely, if ever, want to know if they are true or false,” he said with obvious disdain for that class of society.

“It wasn’t long before someone remembered that I had exposed Dr. Sciamano as a fraud years earlier, and contacted me for my

opinion. Of course I was interested in getting to the bottom of this story. First, because I didn't believe it; second, because I intensely disliked the man.

"Hand me those newspapers," he ordered. "I need to find the one that reported a comment I made about him. It raised a hell-storm for a week. In my younger days my tongue wagged before I could engage my brain in a civilized comment, and he threatened to sue me for libel over it. He never did," he said with a shrug of his thin shoulders. "Smart move on his part."

He took the pile and lifted and discarded one crumbled, unreadable clipping after another, until, with shaking hands, he handed them back to me.

"Can't find it, but no matter," he explained with a frown. "They're part of history's dustbin now."

"Rather than immediately confront Sciamano, I contacted a few of the moribund patients he had allegedly returned to life. My first thought was that there was a conspiracy between him and those people. Faking disease for financial purposes is not unusual. Revival groups across the country 'save' hundreds of

people a year. Paralytics walk, the deaf hear, and the dumb speak, and all for a paltry donation to the minister of some off-the-cuff church.

“I dismissed this fraud as a possibility since the person who rises from his wheelchair to chants of ‘hosanna, hosanna’ doesn’t have medical proof he actually belonged in it.

“Next I reviewed the records of the *miracolati*, since I had investigated cases similar to some of those the newspapers described. I remembered reading about an oncologist that had falsely diagnosed and treated cancer in patients that were totally healthy. After an inappropriate ‘successful’ trial of his dangerous therapies, he pronounced them cured. I wondered, if, before the corrupt oncologist could take credit for his bogus cure, Dr. Sciamano could have intervened, taking the credit for himself?

“This was certainly a possibility, but it could not account for the large number of his cures. And very few patients had been treated by the same physicians before asking Sciamano for his professional assistance.”

Grandfather suddenly pressed both hands over his heart. His color, normally ashen gray

due to his illness, faded even further, and I feared for his life. I stood, intending to call grandmother, but she was already pushing me aside. A moment later she slipped a small pill under grandfather's tongue. She fixed her eyes on him, monitoring his every breath, his every grimace, his every movement. She squeezed his hand between hers and waited. I know she was waiting for the nitroglycerin to take effect, but I believe she was ready to fiercely defend her husband of sixty years from any devil that dared to take him away from her.

"There were other scams that I could have investigated, but those were the most prominent at the time," he continued a few minutes later, after his heart seizure had ended and his color had returned to ashen.

"So I asked for the medical records of the patients who seemed the most unlikely to have survived their disease," he explained, massaging the area over his heart. "I expected resistance from those physicians whose patients' unexpected survivals had damaged their reputations and their medical practices. They could have made unacceptable errors in their diagnoses and treatments, and, of course, would not like anyone to know what they were. But

they all were willing to show me every note, every test, every X-ray they had regarding their patients. In every case except one or two, I agreed with them. There was no reason their patients should have survived their illnesses.

“I now needed to talk with Sciamano. I knew he would remember me, since I had testified against him in court over an unnecessary procedure he had performed on a young woman, leaving her paralyzed on one side of her body. He damned me to hell for it.

“He beat me there, though,” he said, laughing loudly.

“I found the illustrious doctor practicing in an elegant office in San Francisco. His expansive waiting room overflowed with patients. Some were in wheelchairs, others lay on stretchers. Five secretaries sat behind a wide desk answering a bank of phones that never stopped ringing. During a lull in the telethon, I managed to introduce myself to one of them. She called her boss, spoke to him briefly, then told me I would have to wait until the afternoon to see her doctor. I laughed at her ingenious comment. The last thing she needed was for Sciamano to be her doctor.

“I stood against the wall in the back of

the waiting room,” he said, closing his eyes. He had paused, I thought, to revisit the scene that had stamped an indelible image in his mind.

“So I stood watching the faces of those dying patients that would get the privilege of visiting with my ex-colleague that day,” he continued. “I had no doubts that some were so ill, that his face would be the last one they saw before moving on to the next world. One even died in the waiting room, which had a terrifying effect on all the other patients. I never knew what he did in that office, but he never saw more than one or two patients an hour.

“A nurse told me that when he closed for business that day, most of the patients there would camp in his office until he returned the next morning. I found that to be preposterous, and cynically wondered if the sick and dying that arrived on Friday, would stay there until he returned on Monday.

“I watched the last patient he saw that day, emaciated, pale and struggling to breathe, being pushed into Sciamano’s office on a stretcher. Thirty minutes later he walked out smiling. My mouth dropped, and I gaped in amazement. I could not believe my eyes. The charlatan that I knew from years earlier had

actually performed a miracle. He had more than just saved a life, he had actually restored a life that I was certain no one else could have done.

“Sciamano invited me into his office immediately afterwards. To my surprise, he had not aged since I had last seen him twenty or more years earlier – same hairline, same physical shape, same cynical grin. Another impossibility among the many that I had heard about, and now seen with my own eyes. He could have been the son of the Sciamano I knew.

“He seemed happy to see me, although I did not understand why he would be. He knew I was there for one purpose—to expose him as a fraudster.”

Grandfather grunted and lay back. Grandmother was by his side before his head hit his pillow. Some people would have considered her an obsessive, pushy woman, who domineered over her aging husband, but they would have been wrong. She had complete control over his life, but it was with a tenderness, concern, and passion that I have never witnessed before in a couple, married or not. I had hoped at the time to be as lucky in marriage as grandfather was. Unfortunately I

was not, but that is another story.

“Forgive me,” he said after his pain had passed. “Just a twinge of indigestion.”

“No need,” I said, embarrassed by the request. I was in my first year of medical school, and hardly a diagnostician, but I doubted that his pain was coming from his stomach. I looked over to grandmother. She knitted her eyebrows and shook her head at me before giving grandfather a kiss on the cheek.

“I have to do something. It’ll only take a minute, then I’ll be back,” she told him.

He nodded agreement, then ran a hand through his sparse hair and rubbed a circle into a side of it. It gave his face a lopsided appearance, and I snickered behind my hand. Grandfather raised an eyebrow, which made me drop it into my lap and sit at attention.

“His office was as large as his waiting room,” he continued, “and elegantly furnished, obviously by a high priced interior decorator. If I remember correctly, Sciamano had trouble even matching his socks. There were doors on either side of the room. I presumed one led to an examining room; the one opposite it was slightly ajar. I thought I smelled a familiar, very unpleasant, odor emanating from the room

behind it, but it was so faint, I could not be sure. For the moment I put it out of my mind.

“A huge antique oak desk sat in front of a bank of windows overlooking San Francisco Bay and the Golden Bay Bridge. Photographs of what I presumed were his wives and children covered one side of the desk, and a multiple button phone, a small desktop computer, and other decorative items covered the rest of it. Three chairs, equally large and antique, were neatly aligned in front of it.

“How are you, my old friend?’ Sciamano asked me as I sat in the middle chair. His eyes sparkled as they did when he was about to con someone. He made a show of welcoming me into his inner sanctum as if I were a dear, long lost friend. We both knew I wasn’t, and I just shrugged it off.

“Fine, just fine. And you?’ I asked him. I’m not the friendliest person in the world, and I have difficulty hiding my dislike for someone, but I had a job to do. Stoking animosity would have ended our meeting, so I forgot how much I disliked him.

“I hear you are preforming miracles in this spectacular office, and I thought I’d drop in and see for myself,’ I told him. ‘Actually I did

see a miracle. A dying patient was wheeled in here while I was in your waiting room, and he walked out in good health. What was your magic therapy?’

“He smiled his usual, snotty, arrogant simile, one his parents should have wiped off his face when he was a kid,” grandfather said with a shrug. I knew he was serious about that little act of violence, since I had been the target of it a few times in my younger years. I’m not an especially fast learner, and he continued his training until he was convinced I had learned whatever lesson he thought I needed to learn.

“His answer was evasive, of course,” grandfather explained, throwing up his hands. “As he described what he had learned from his training in various countries and cultures about the cure of terminal illnesses, the smell emanating from the room on my left intensified. It was the unmistakable odor of death and putrefaction. I involuntarily wrinkled my nose, then covered it with my hand. Sciamano immediately understood. He quickly rose from his chair, crossed the room, and closed the door.

“‘Sorry about that,’ he said with a sly grin. ‘It’s a laboratory where I recheck the tests my patients bring with them. So you’ve read

about the miracles I've been performing on my quite ill patients?'

"'Yes,' I responded, still rubbing my nose. 'They are miraculous. You certainly have improved your skills over the years.'

"He seemed pleased, but anything that did not put him into narcissistic collapse, pleased him. He then described some of his more miraculous cures, and I nodded continuously as he did. They truly were miraculous, but he was not one who could walk on water and pull innumerable fish out of a basket. When he believed he had convinced me of his bravura, he stood from his desk and unceremoniously walked me out of his office.

"I never saw him again. I stopped to briefly examine a few patients in his waiting room before leaving, and I was again convinced that they were indeed at death's door. I was also convinced that the smell that emanated from that room was not that of a laboratory chemical. The stench of putrefaction is one that a physician never forgets.

"I thought about it during my flight home and for a few weeks afterwards, long enough to convince me that I had to notify the police. I could not know what they would find in that

room, but I knew they had to look.

“After their visit a few weeks after my complaint, the newspapers described what the police had found. I have a copy of several of those newspapers, or had, I should say. That pile of of decaying newsprint is all that is left of the scandal that rocked the nation,” he said, pointing to it.

“I’m sure that what was reported was a watered down version of what the police found. The most graphic of the newspaper articles reported that after obtaining a warrant, the police notified Dr. Sciamano of their impending visit. This is most unusual, since it gives the person under suspicion time to hide evidence that could convict him. In this case, however the reporters who penned their fantasies, wrote that Sciamano had hid nothing. What they did not understand, I believe, was that that was not his intention.”

We could hear grandmother and the others in the dining room singing Happy Birthday to grandfather, and he stopped talking and squinted towards the doorway. She led the entourage to the bedroom, but stopped with the cake and its infinite number of candles burning over its two chocolate tiers when she saw

grandfather shake his head. He raised a shaky finger to his lips, and blew her a kiss. She trembled, and a tear come to her eye. She understood something that I did not, and silently returned to the dining room.

“So, the police entered his office, and found it empty,” grandfather continued slowly. He was tiring, and his color was almost the same as it was during his heart seizure minutes earlier.

“The nauseating smell in that office had reached such an intensity that several of the officers were overcome and had to be carried from the room. Those brave enough to enter the ‘laboratory’ found Sciamano lying on the floor. He was hideously deformed by myriad foul smelling tumors of various sizes and shapes that covered his entire body. Some on his chest had broken down and were bleeding or oozing a foul-smelling yellow-green pus. Several of those on his abdomen had exploded, exposing writhing clumps of brown and black cells that seemed to be alive.

“Aside from the self-inflicted gunshot wound to the side of his head, his face remained untouched by disease, leaving him recognizable to all who knew him. On the table next to him

was the body of a physically fit young man in his thirties. He was completely nude, and aside from the hunting knife in the middle of his chest, appeared to be in perfect health.

“No one ever knew what had happened in that room, but after thinking about it for months, I came to a logical, absurd, and fantastical conclusion. I believed that Sciamano had smuggled a living, drugged, body, or possibly a cadaver from a morgue, into his office. Then in a way I do not understand, managed to transfer the tumors, infections, and other fatal diseases from his dying patients into that creature, leaving them healthy and hardy.

“He truly was performing miracles, since he cured dying patients.

“All that came tumbling down when he was served by the warrant. He mistakenly thought that after killing his silent partner, excuse the pun, with that hunting knife, he could then smuggle it out of his office and bury it where it would never be found. When the tumors suddenly left the body he had just stabbed and entered his own, knowing how agonizing his imminent death would be, he shot himself. His last moments must have been horrific.

“Thus ended the career of one of the greatest medical con artists of the century. But was he really a con artist? After all, he did save lives. People who had only days or weeks to live before he treated them, walked out of his office in perfect health, now able to spend many more years with their families and friends. I imagine the world might have been better off had some of those lives not been saved. But I am not one to judge.

“Now young man,” my grandfather said to me, fixing his gray eyes on me, “do *you* believe any of this? If you become a doctor, and have the choice that Sciamano had, will you follow in his footsteps?”

I did not have a chance to respond to his moral challenge since, as he was asking it, he had another heart seizure and died.

I eventually graduated medical school, to everyone’s surprise, and after years of study in Tibet and Africa, I have become quite famous in my field of holistic reanimation. I am world renowned as *the* physician to come to when your doctors cannot cure your fatal disease.

In Miniature

"Go for a walk, jerk! Get out of the house! You're unbearable," fat Victoria Johnson growled from the couch as she threw her empty beer can at her skinny, cowering, red-haired husband.

"I'm sorry, dear," Red said contritely, picking up the can from the floor. *All you do is lie on the couch, drink beer, and watch soaps, you fat bitch.* "You're right. It'd do me good to get out, honey. But it's raining," he protested weakly.

"You won't grow fungus in your useless crotch," the middle-aged woman taunted. "Just get out of here so I can watch my soaps in peace."

He quietly took his overcoat from the hall closet and exited the apartment, silently closing the door behind him before donning it.

Bitch, the fifty-eight-year-old unemployed painter thought as he painfully limped down their building's narrow, rickety steps to the street. His right leg had not healed properly after she pushed him down that same staircase three years earlier, and it always cramped when he climbed or descended those stairs.

"They say to look to her mother if you want to know how your wife will look in thirty years. I did, but the pig took after her father," he said remorsefully.

The TV meteorologist had predicted sunshine, but it was raining and cold in old New England. He pulled his worn coat tightly around him and stuck his hands in his armpits to keep them warm as he meandered the slippery cobblestone streets of his city that predated the Civil War. As the rain intensified, he ducked into a narrow, dark passage, hoping to find a bar or shop where he could wait out the storm. He limped down the alley until it opened into a small square he could not remember ever having seen before. He did, however, remember seeing the old weathered buildings lining its grassy perimeter; they were in the local museum's collection of sketches of the city as it

existed in the 1700s.

The rickety wooden structures still leaned precariously against one other for support, as he remembered from the pictures. He was sure that if one collapsed, the others would follow, like a row of tumbling dominoes.

As he stepped off the cobblestones and onto the grassy square, the rain suddenly stopped and the sun appeared from behind dark clouds. He limped around the dry, wood-planked walk, stopping occasionally to massage his sore leg or to glance in a store window, until he found himself standing in front of a small building with a peaked roof and gray clapboard siding. "Hobby Shop," was painted in black Gothic letters on the silver sign hanging from its gable. Through its dirty window so he could see wooden models of centuries old warships, each with crew members frozen in eternal labor on their detailed, delicate decks.

I've explored every nook and cranny of this city since I was a boy. Why haven't I seen this place before? he wondered as he lifted the door's ornate brass latch and entered the store.

As he crossed the cozy, candlelit shop to its oak counter, a bell on the wall jangled on the wall behind it, and hand-hewn floorboards

moaned underfoot. He savored a cherry blend pipe tobacco as he eyed the boxes that filled the cubicles in the wall behind the counter and were stacked on the floor. On a long table to his right were a dozen handcrafted dinghies, dhows, and 17th Century three-masted sailing vessels. The smaller ships were enclosed in glass cases while the heads of carved porpoises on wooden bases cradled the larger ones. Except for one brightly painted model, which seemed to be a recent construction, each was old and held a crew in various dress and employ.

As Red examined the ships, a wizened old man parted a black curtain behind the counter and entered the room puffing on his brier pipe. "May I help you, sir?" he asked in a cracking voice.

"I just was passing by and noticed your store. I've always been intrigued by model ships."

"Yes, they're special, and each carries a unique cargo. Have you ever built one?"

"No. My wife says I couldn't put a sandwich in a Ziploc bag without messing up."

"That's unkind of her," he said with a gentle laugh. His eyes twinkled as he spoke. "All our models come with detailed instructions

and diagrams. Even a beginner can build one with simple hand tools. Would you like to take a closer look at one of them?"

"Sure," Red replied excitedly.

The old man walked to the table against the wall, picked up the model of Lord Nelson's famous ship *Victory*, and returned to the counter. "This is a great one," he said. "A must on every shipbuilder's list. Even though it's only two feet long, all the accouterments of the real ship are faithfully reproduced in scale."

"It's beautiful!" Red exclaimed, afraid to touch it. "But why is there no one on the deck of this ship as there are on all the others?"

"Each modeler places his figures wherever he likes. If you look through the stern lights, those are the rear windows, on this one, you'll see the captain in his cabin. And if you look through the cannon ports, you'll see the crew swabbing the gun deck."

Red took his eyeglasses from his shirt pocket, blew a speck of dust off a lens before donning them, and then peered through the stern window. Through the mica glass he could see a man in 1800s dress lying on a couch reading a book.

"It might be fun to build one of these

things," he said, twisting his head to see the other areas of the cabin. Just as he started to look away, the figure on the couch moved his arm. "He's alive!" he exclaimed.

"Ha, ha," the old man laughed, stroking his beard and puffing on his pipe. "It's an optical illusion. The mirror on the wall of the cabin reflects a double image when you look at it in a certain direction. That's why the man seated at the table seemed to move."

"But he's lying on the couch," Red protested. "He's not sitting at the table."

"Oh, I'm thinking of the captain of the Confederacy. I apologize."

"It sure fooled me," he said, shaking his head. "I could have sworn he moved."

"I might have just the ship for you," the old man offered, scratching his white-haired head in thought. He rummaged through the cubicles in the wall until he found the Cutty Sark, a fast clipper ship from the 1800s.

"Ah, here she is," he said, taking the large, dusty box from the shelf. "She's a beauty, and is very easy to build. Once you've finished her, I guarantee that your whole life will be different."

"But I don't have any tools," Red

protested.

"They're included in the kit. All you need is a bottle of white glue, and I'll throw it in free."

"Deal," he said, pulling his wallet from his pocket.

The shopkeeper put the bottle of glue in the box, wrapped it in a thin sheet of plastic, and handed it to Red, who paid him and left the store. He walked around the square, glancing in the shop windows until he arrived back at the passage that had led him into the square. As he stepped onto the cobblestones, the sky again blackened and the rain returned. He tucked the box under his overcoat and hurried home.

"Back already, Useless Thumbs?" his fat wife asked from the couch as he opened the door to their small, dirty apartment. "I had hoped you would stay away forever. Put your coat in the bathtub. I just cleaned in here, and I don't want you dripping water all over my floors."

"Sorry, honey," he said, quickly doffing his coat and putting it in the bathroom as ordered. *Cleaned what floors, you sow? Only your relatives would eat off this one.*

"I'm going to build a model ship in the

guest bedroom, if you don't mind, dear," he said meekly when he returned to the living room holding his package. His fat wife was sipping a beer and concentrating on her TV soap.

"Why don't you just throw it out now?" she said scornfully. "It's what you'll do in a month, after you make a mess out of it. Get me another beer from the fridge and then get lost. You're interrupting my program."

Red put his box on the hall table and went into the kitchen. He felt the beer cans in the refrigerator until he found the coldest, and brought it to his wife, popping the top along the way.

"Here, dear," he said. He handed her the can, hoping that it was the right temperature. She took it and rubbed it against her cheek. "You finally got it right. Now get lost," she growled. He nodded humbly, picked up his model, and went into the bedroom.

"Don't you dare make a mess in there," his fat wife shouted after him as he closed the door.

He unwrapped his treasure on a writing table in the corner of the room and feasted his eyes on the kit's wooden and metal contents. He removed the neatly folded plans, opened them

on the bed, and then scratched his head. "Bulkhead, scantlings, planks. What language is this?" he wondered as he read the instructions. "I don't understand any of it."

He returned to the box and removed a bag of heavy brass parts, recognizing none of them. "That old codger is crazy. I'll never be able to build this model," he said despairingly. But then he thought of his alternative: sitting in his worn easy chair watching reruns on TV while his fat wife verbally, and, when she felt like it, physically abused him.

He sat at the desk and carefully removed the wooden pieces from the box and compared them to the pictures on the hand-drawn plans. He then set about cutting and sanding them to the measurements on the plans, but even though he tried hard to follow the directions, he soon realized his model would never look like the one on the box cover. If he didn't break the piece he was working on, he mounted it incorrectly. Bulkheads were in the wrong order or, instead of being glued at right angles to the keel, were crooked. Planks snapped when he tried to bend them to the curve of the hull, and even when he occasionally succeeded, he used so much glue that it seeped out between the

boards in ugly, thick gobs.

Each night Red would examine what he had built during the day, then, shaking his head in disgust, would tear it down, promising to rebuild it better the next day.

Each morning before sunrise, when he returned to his bench to reexamine his model before beginning the next step in its construction, he never noticed that it had fewer defects than it did the night before. Nor did he realize that often the piece of the model he thought he was cutting, filing and shaping for the first time, was the same one he had broken or torn down the day before.

After a few weeks, his steel tools, once cold and unfamiliar, became warm extensions of his hands, and he began effortlessly to cut and shape even the most intricate fittings. As his newfound certainty that his model would be equal to the ships he had seen in the shop window of that mysterious square, so did his enthusiasm to complete it. He increased the time at his workbench until he was fervently and feverishly working twenty hours a day, often not eating or sleeping.

"You've been working on that for months now," he fat wife griped one evening from the

doorway, casting a huge shadow on the bedroom floor. She was holding a beer can in one hand and shoveling peanuts into her mouth with the other. Red continued gluing the fife rail to the deck, but remembering the time she threw him down the stairs in a fit of anger, worked with one eye on her huge shadow. He knew that beer made her even more violent than usual, and he would not let her destroy his model in a fit of anger. If she moved a step toward him, he would do whatever it took to protect his vessel.

"Tomorrow I want you to get your skinny ass out on the street and look for a job," she demanded, shifting her huge weight from one fat leg to the other. "Bills have to be paid, and you know I'm too sick to work."

"You're not sick. You're just fat, beer-laden, and lazy," he replied. He never before had the courage to respond to her like that, and his words shocked even him.

"What am I?" she growled, stepping into the room.

"Stay where you are!" he commanded, standing from his workbench. He picked up a scalpel and walked towards her. "Beat it, you fat bitch!" he growled. She quickly backed away, and he slammed and locked the door behind her.

For the next two days he worked constantly on his Cutty Sark, not stopping for food or rest. When his fat wife pounded on the door, rattling it in its frame, he would order without looking up from his model, "Go away, fatso, or I'll have you keelhauled!" *Keelhauled*, he thought? *Where did that word come from?*

On the third day he did not answer her insistent pounding, and she called 911. Two policemen arrived shortly afterwards, and after she had explained the mysterious happenings in the bedroom, they removed the pins from its hinges and pried open the door. The sergeant stood in the doorway and peered into the dimly lit room as his partner walked over to the model. Apart from a perfectly built Cutty Sark sitting proudly on its workbench, the room was empty.

"Let's hear that story again, Ma'am," he asked the fat wife. "You say your husband locked himself in this empty room three days ago, and now has disappeared?"

"Yes," she repeated, "but the room wasn't empty then. This was a fully furnished bedroom. He was working on that model," she explained, pointing towards the workbench. "He spoke to me through the door yesterday, but

today he didn't answer me."

The patrolman, who was standing by the workbench and jotting down the conversation, leaned over and peered into the model's cabin.

"You know, Sarge," he interrupted the fat woman as she was telling his partner how much she adored her husband, "this is the most beautiful model ship I have ever seen. There's even a tiny man with red hair lying on a bed, reading a book. In fact, he's so realistic, that for a second, I thought he moved his arm."

Accidentally Yours

"I don't think you should drive home tonight, Jack," Hal Freeman said to his friend as they walked to the front door of his modest home after a late dinner. "You've had far too much to drink. You should sleep here and go home in the morning,"

"Nonsense, Hal. I drank more the last time I was here, and I made it home just fine. I can hold my likker," Jack replied, slightly slurring his words. "Don't you worry 'bout me," he assured his friend, wagging a finger inches from his nose.

"I'm sure you can 'hold your likker'," Hal repeated sternly, pushing his finger away, "but that expensive sports car you just bought might be too much for you to handle, with the rain and all." He opened the hall closet, retrieved Jack's still damp coat, and held it out

to him.

"Don't sweat it. I'll be fine," Jack assured his host, taking the garment. "See you at my place next Friday night. My cook has something special planned for your birthday," he said as he fumbled to insert an arm in its sleeve.

Hal shook his head, his lips pressed into a thin line. He knew that Jack had had been involved in a minor, drinking and driving accident a year earlier, but had escaped justice. As a lawyer, Jack knew the right answers to the judge's questions and had received only a warning. Even so, he was certain his friend's standing in the profession would save him only once, and that his next DUI would send him to jail.

Jack slipped his other arm into the other sleeve and buttoned his raincoat. After he slurred another assurance to his friend that he would have no trouble driving home, he stepped into the black, rainy night.

Hal Freeman and Jack Reynolds had been good friends since law school, but because of insurmountable financial difficulties, Hal had been forced to quit his studies during his second semester, and to accept a job working for an advertising firm.

Jack had been more pragmatic about his economic troubles, and had borrowed money from family, friends, and neighbors, promising each that he would repay his debts after he graduated. His acute intellect and hard work had combined to make him a very successful lawyer, and, within a couple of years after graduation, he had kept his promise to repay all his debts with interest.

To ease the stresses of his job, however, he had increased his single noonday martini to two, and then to three. His drinking had cost him two wives that had loved his toys but not his drunken, violent outbursts, or, as one had written in her request for a divorce, "being married to a walking pickle."

Jack smiled contentedly at his red Ferrari parked at the curb. It was a very rare and very expensive 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO, which *Motor Trend Classic* had placed first on its list of the "Greatest Ferraris of All Time." It was a gift he had bought himself after winning a multi-million dollar lawsuit against a powerful and prestigious law firm.

He pulled up his collar to ward off the rain that was increasing in intensity and walked around the red race car, admiring its sleek lines

as he ran his hand over the roof. His chest swelled with pride as he opened the car's door and slipped onto its leather driver's seat.

He turned the key in the ignition, touched the gas, and grinned as the twelve cylinder engine roared the guttural sound that only a Ferrari could make. A minute later he shifted into first gear, let up the clutch, and sped off into the darkness.

Jack lived in the city, and the road back from the "sticks" as he referred to the farm country that Hal had called home since his birth, was unlit, full of curves, and had been scheduled to be repaved to rid it of the numerous potholes that marred its surface.

It had been raining the entire evening, sometimes so lightly as to not damage the leaves of a flower. Other times lightning and thunder rattled the windows and doors of Hal's converted barn.

Rain water had filled the ruts and craters in the road, but it had not been enough to wash off the oil that had built up on the pavement from the heavy traffic during the long dry summer. It left the road slippery and treacherous in spots.

Let's see what this baby can do, Jack

thought as he pressed down on the gas pedal. "The road is empty, and there won't be any cops around at this hour," he mumbled.

As the car sped down the straightaways and slid easily through the curves of the dark, wet, and winding pavement, an elk suddenly appeared in the middle of the road, frozen in the blinding lights of the rapidly approaching automobile.

Jack jammed on the brakes and downshifted quickly, but the powerful Ferrari swerved out of control, spun sideways, and crashed broadside into a tree. He was thrown forward by the rapid deceleration, slamming his shoulder into the door and smashing his head into the corner of the windshield. He lay unconscious over the steering wheel as blood trickled down into his left eye from the large gash in his forehead.

What happened? he wondered, as his mind slowly cleared a short time later. "Oh, yeah. Damn elk! I could have been killed," he growled, pounding his hand several times on the steering wheel. He climbed over the shift lever to the passenger's side of the car, and stumbled out the door.

He stepped away from the wreck and

surveyed the damage. "She's finished," he said remorsefully, shaking his head. "My prize is *finished!*" he yelled sorrowfully. He knew he was lucky to have survived the crash, but he suffered more from the destruction of one of the great cars **of** automotive history. He promised himself that he would have it restored, no matter the cost.

He turned from the demolished automobile and searched the area for signs of life. His legs felt weak, and he was still bleeding from his scalp wound, despite the pressure he was applying to it with his hand. He knew he needed to find help quickly before he passed out from the loss of blood.

At least the rain has stopped, he thought.

The sky was clear, and a full moon brightened the copse to his right, where he saw a small, tidy group of houses. Since the lights were on in all of them, he presumed their inhabitants were at home. As he walked towards the village, he wondered why he had never noticed it before.

He stopped at the first of the four houses lining a narrow, dry, and well-maintained dirt road. "Robert Johansson" was the name on the mailbox by the curb. He passed through the

white wooden gate and walked up the path to the front door. A young man answered his knock.

"Hello, may I help you?" he asked as he opened the door.

"Yes," Jack replied. "I was just in an accident down the road and I was wondering if—

—

"Say," he asked, rubbing the blood from an eye, "don't I know you from somewhere?"

The man's eyes widened in recognition. "Why yes, you're Jack Reynolds! Of course we know each other! How are you? It's been ages since I last saw you. Holly High School wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, Robert. May I come in?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, how impolite of me. Please do," he said, moving aside to let his guest enter his modest home.

They went into the kitchen and sat at a small table where Jack sipped a cup of coffee and explained what had happened on the road while Robert dressed his head wound. He nodded, occasionally making a clicking sound with his tongue and teeth to show his concern, but said nothing until Jack had finished describing everything he could remember from

the accident.

"Have you ever seen any of the other guys from Holly High?" Jack asked, as Robert poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Sure. Three others live here in the village. They're right down the street. We can visit them tonight if you like. They're regular night-owls and just love company."

* * * *

"What a wreck! Such a beautiful car," one policeman said to this partner. He pulled his raincoat over his head to protect himself from the driving rain.

"Yeah, a real shame," answered the other, blowing on his hands to warm them. "Jack Reynolds was the driver. We went to Holly High together. It looks like he died instantly. He's the fifth guy from my class to die on this turn in the road in the past six years. The last was Robert Johansson. We'll have to do something about this curve."

Flight Twenty

"You worry too much, Bob. We go through this every time you fly," the thin, middle-aged woman told her husband. "I've told you the same thing hundreds of times. *Nothing will happen to you,*" She clicked her tongue against her teeth, frustrated by her husband's thickheadedness.

"Sure, I know, Helen. You're right," he replied apologetically, scratching his short beard. "But you know there comes a time when the law of averages catches up with you. I truly feel that time is now, or will be tomorrow during my flight. I'm sorry, but I just can't get the thought out of my mind."

Bob Nichols, a trim forty-six-year-old, and his pretty wife of twenty years were in their bedroom dressing for dinner and arguing over his departure for Germany, exactly as they had

done before every flight for the last ten years.

Bob was a highly successful representative for a large, multinational corporation, and had traveled so often, he had come to believe flying was his business and selling his pastime. But after each flight, his obsessive certainty that the next one would end in disaster became more ingrained in his thoughts and actions. Had he had the wherewithal to retire, he would have done so, and without regrets.

"Hurry and finish dressing, dear, our guests will be here soon," Helen said as she walked to the bathroom.

"Why they always come over the night before a big trip is beyond me," Bob replied, straightening his tie. "They're nice people, but they only make me more nervous about my flight ending--"

"Oh, pshaw!" Helen interrupted angrily, throwing up her hands. "Please stop it! You're driving me crazy. It would be tough, but we could make do on what I earn if you were to quit your job. Maybe that's what you should do after your return.

"Anyway, the Fatali like you, which is more than most of our neighbors do, and they

just want to wish you a safe trip. So forget your imaginary tragedy and be nice to them.

"By the way, Ruth believes, thanks to her family astrologer, that their coming over the night before your trip guarantees your safety."

As she entered the bathroom, the door bell rang.

"They're here already," she said, softly closing the door behind her. "Go welcome them. I'll be along in a few minutes."

Astrology. What's next? A witches' cabal? Bob wondered. He sighed and went downstairs, still trying to shake the persistent, morbid feeling that had been bothering him all day.

The bell rang again as he opened the door.

"Hi folks," he said with a forced smile. Any other night he would have been happy to see Ruth and Hank; tonight he felt they were intruding into his life. He would have preferred a book, a glass of wine, and a Beethoven symphony to accompany his whining.

"Hi, Bob. I know we're early," Hank said apologetically. "I hope it's OK. I had to stop at my office to resolve a problem, and it didn't take as long as I thought it would."

"You're welcome at any time, come in," he answered, stepping back from the entrance. *But not tonight!* he thought.

The Fatali were the Mutt and Jeff of the neighborhood, and the butt of many unkind jokes. Hank was six-feet-seven inches tall and slim as a rail. Ruth was an inch over five feet, and resembled a walking wine barrel.

"Let me take your coats," Bob said, viewing their unwelcome visit with disdain.

"You know where the bar is. Helen will be down shortly."

He hung their coats in the closet just off the entrance and joined his guests in the living room of his small, but elegantly furnished home. Rich bric-a-brac, collected during his many trips to Europe, hung on the walls and sat prominently on the hand-made antique mahogany and ebony furniture that adorned each room. Some of his guests had called his home a museum, and his modest, "thank you," had belied the immense pleasure he derived from the compliment.

After a few drinks and polite, but inane conversation, which only heightened Bob's anxiety that the evening would be the last he celebrated on this earth, they moved to the

dining room and sat down to a dinner of chicken flautas and a creamy caramel flan.

As she stood to clear the dishes from the table later that evening, Helen pointed to the pile of uneaten flautas on the plate in the middle of the table.

"I'm sorry the meal isn't as good as usual," she explained, embarrassed by her failed culinary effort, "but I craved Mexican food tonight. This is the first time I've made this dish, and I guess I should have tried it on Bob first before giving it a public tasting."

"No, they are really good," Hank protested without enthusiasm. Bob's stomach loudly grumbled its displeasure, but no one seemed to notice.

"How long will you be gone this time, Bob?" Hank asked. He waited for an answer, and drew his lips into a straight line and frowned when his host ignored his question.

"Bob? You with us?"

Bob massaged his furrowed brow over knitted eyebrows. "Sorry, I've had a bad feeling about this trip. Something keeps warning me not to go. What did you ask?" he wondered.

"I asked you how long will you be gone this time."

"A week, maybe more. It depends on how the deal goes."

"Bob is in his usual pre-flight worry mood," Helen interrupted with a gentle shrug of her shoulders. She reached over and squeezed his arm. "This time he's *absolutely* certain his plane is going to crash into the ocean. Usually he's just certain that it will."

"If he didn't have something to worry about, he wouldn't be the Bob we know and love," Hank laughed.

"Helen, do we have any Alka-Seltzer?" Bob asked, wishing he were rocking in a chair on a waterfront dock instead of trying to entertain unwelcome guests.

"Sure," she replied. She picked up a few of the dishes, put them in the sink in the kitchen, and returned a few minutes later with a glass filled with a bubbling solution. Bob quickly drained it and put the empty glass on the table.

After another hour of small talk, Ruth stood from the table. "Well, it's been a lovely evening," she said. "It's time to let Bob get some rest. He has a long day ahead of him tomorrow."

Finally! Bob jumped from his chair,

quickly led his guests to the front door, handed them their coats from the closet, and gently but firmly pushed them out into the cold night.

"Have a nice trip, Bob," Hank said over his shoulder. "If I don't see you again, I promise I'll think often about you," he laughed.

"You're a real comedian," Bob answered curtly before closing the door and returning to the dining room. "I don't know how you stand them, Helen," he said. "Good luck charms or not, I would prefer they not come over the night before my trips."

"They're not that bad," she answered. "What time do you have to get up in the morning?" she added as, arm in arm, they climbed the staircase to their bedroom.

"I'll set the alarm for seven. My stomach feels like it has a rock inside it," he explained, massaging a circle onto his abdomen.

"You sound like an old lady. For the millionth time, you'll be fine."

"You may be right, Helen," he sighed, "but you *know* I have ESP. Do you remember what happened to me when I was in college? I told you about that episode. It was in a small town with not a lot going for it, but on that odd day I drove to Main Street to buy a few things.

As soon as I got out of my car, it felt like someone hit me over the head with a club. I thought I was going to faint. I went into a nearby coffee shop, thinking my blood sugar was low because I had skipped breakfast. It didn't help. I still felt wobbly and out of sorts.

"As I walked along the street, all I saw was destruction. Windows were broken, paint was splashed on the store walls, and there was even a small fire in one. Until I stepped off the curb at the end of the block, that was. I turned back to take another look at the stores, but peace had returned. There was no destruction, nothing had happened. I had imagined it all. Or so I thought. Three hours later there was a race riot. Everything that I had seen hours before, replayed itself—exactly as I had seen it!"

"I remember that story," she said, "but still--"

"But 'still' nothing." Bob said brusquely. "How about our honeymoon trip to Italy? We were driving through, what was the name of that town, Vano? I think. I can't remember now. But I'm sure you remember the fountain in the courtyard of the castle that had been converted into a hotel-restaurant. It was a big fountain that I told you didn't belong there. It was too new,

and the style was wrong. I asked the groundskeeper about it, and he told me that there used to be a well where the fountain is. During the war the Nazis slaughtered all the men in the town and threw their bodies into it. After the war the residents who had survived everything but their memories, could not bear to see that well. It was too painful for them, so they built the fountain over it to try to hide the atrocity.”

“Well. Yes,” she agreed with a nod. “There was that also. You do seem to have a sixth sense about certain things, but you’ve been fearing this plane crash for ten years now, and, thankfully, it hasn’t happened yet. But if it bothers you so much, why not quit and cancel the flight?”

Bob squeezed his lips in thought. “You’re right,” he said after a while. “I should cancel it, but I can’t now. It’s too late. It would cause tremendous harm to my company. But I can do what you suggest,” he said, his face brightening with the thought. “After I return I’ll give my boss the option of moving me to another department or accepting my resignation.

“I think he’ll work with me to keep me on. What do you think?”

“It’s a great idea!” Helen said. “But if not, we’ll survive without your income. Mine as an interior designer pays enough to cover our monthly expenses. Do it!”

“Great! Yes it is a great idea. I can’t go through this two or three times a year anymore,” Bob said as walked to the bathroom to get ready for bed. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. I just need to stop obsessing about this silly fear.”

Fifteen minutes later, lying in bed together, Helen leaned over, kissed her husband on the cheek, and said with a laugh, “Count sheep instead of plane crashes.” She immediately regretted her unkind suggestion, apologized, and said, “Nite,” before turning off the light on the her night table.

“Nite,” Bob replied. He rolled over and covered his head with the bed sheet.

Bob shook his wife’s shoulder. “Helen, wake up!” he ordered gently.

“Bob, you’re all dressed. What’s wrong?” she asked, quickly sitting up in bed. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“Nothing is wrong. I couldn’t sleep so I got up and dressed.”

“Are you leaving for the airport now?”

"No. It's too early. I'll read a bit downstairs before I take off."

"Have a safe trip. How is your stomach?" she asked.

"A little better, but not much. I'll call you when I arrive in Germany."

Two hours later Bob entered the airport terminal, just as flight twenty, his flight, was being announced over the loudspeaker. He walked to its departure gate, still troubled by the bleak forebodings that had been plaguing him incessantly for two days. Even though Helen had convinced him that nothing would happen to him on this flight, and even though he had forced himself to agree with her, rarely had he had such persistent feelings of doom. He remembered reading an article in *Reader's Digest* about a father whose premonition of imminent death had saved his family's life by delaying their departure for their vacation. The bridge they were to cross on their journey across country that day had collapsed under heavy winds, and the fifteen cars on it at the time ended up in the Mississippi river.

He again thought of canceling the trip, but reluctantly passed through the gate, took a

step to board the plane, and froze. *There was no floor!* He looked down through the gaping hole just inside the door and saw frenzied ocean waves, huge, frothy, and black, reaching up to him. *I can't...*

“Sir, please come aboard,” the hostess said. “There are passengers behind you that need to get to their seats.”

Bob looked quizzically at the female attendant that was holding out her hand to him. He did not understand who she was and what she wanted. She repeated her request, this time more forcefully, took his hand, and eased him over the threshold and into the cabin. He looked at the unbroken carpet beneath his feet and then back at the attendant.

“I'm sorry,” he said sheepishly, as his mind cleared. “I got a little dizzy for a moment.”

The attendant nodded her understanding, and Bob walked unsteadily to his window seat. As he put his carry-on suitcase into the overhead locker, he tried to make sense of what had just happened, but the more he searched for answers, the murkier the situation became. That hole in the floor was like the street in flames he saw when he was in college. His obsessive fear

that this would be his last flight had returned.

He took his seat, rested his head on the seatback, and looked out the window. Jagged bolts of lightening lit up the dark clouds swarming in the distance. He pulled down the shade and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later, the usual, "This is your Captain speaking," announced the beginning of the flight.

"I wish to wel...flight...flying at 30,0....sunny, clear ski..." he mumbled.

"Clear *what?*" Bob said, bolting upright in his seat. *There is a storm out there.* He jerked up the window shade and peered out. The sun was shining and there was not a cloud in the sky. He flung up his hands. *I'm losing my mind,* he thought.

He refused the food a pretty hostess offered him shortly after take-off, and continued studying the dark clouds that had reappeared off the wing. They rolled over one another, releasing random jagged bolts of lightening as they were doing when he first took his seat. He tightened his seat belt. *Nope, they're not there,* he told himself. *I'm imagining everything. Just as Helen says, I worry too much.* He pulled down the window shade, leaned back, and

closed his eyes.

"Please fasten your seat belt, ma'am," the hostess said sometime later to the elderly woman sitting next to him. Her plastic voice awakened him from a troubled sleep.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked quickly. His palms started to sweat as he searched her face for a clue. Aside from a pretty smile, it was emotionless.

"No, sir. Everything is fine. The captain says his radar shows bad weather ahead, and he wants all the passengers to fasten their seat belts as a precaution. The ride might get bumpy," she replied before moving to the passengers in the row behind him.

The mumbling, mostly incomprehensible message over the cabin speakers now warned of thunder storms with gale wind forces ahead, and he felt his heart race as the message became more undecipherable. *I knew I should have canceled this trip.*

"I rec... Landing time...timated.... have to detour flight to Bost... if...," were the only words he could understand.

He glanced around at the passengers nearby. From the unconcerned look on their faces, Bob presumed they had not heard the

same message he had. The stewards were laughing and chatting at the head of the aisle, as if nothing out of the ordinary was occurring. He called one over.

"Are we in any danger?" he asked, squeezing a fist into the palm of his other hand.

"No, sir," she replied calmly. "It's just bad weather, but we're nowhere near it. The weather in the north Atlantic is unpredictable. The captain says we might have to layover in Boston if it worsens, but it's no worse than what we've experienced before on this route."

At that moment a new, garbled message come over the intercom: "This is your Captain speaking," the troubled voice said. "Boston and the surroun... airports ... close. We are...forced land... at New York. Please...assistance."

"I hate plane crashes," the airline executive told his subordinate an hour later. They were standing at a desk in an office humming with people posting messages on blackboards, talking on phones, or shouting commands to no one in particular. It was the same controlled chaos that reigned in the headquarters of every airline company whenever one of their jets crashed, killing the

hundreds of passengers on board.

"The worst part is telling the families," the executive muttered to himself, but loud enough for anyone nearby to hear.

"Let's see," he said, running a finger down the passenger list. "The next is Bob Nichols, representing Advanco, in Los Angeles. 213-555-1213," he said. He dialed the number and put the receiver up to his ear.

"It's ringing," he said.

* * * *

Helen reached over in bed and shook her husband's shoulder. "Bob," she said softly, "it's seven o'clock. Time to get up or you'll miss your plane. And turn off that alarm clock. It sounds like a phone ringing, and it's driving me crazy."

Develop Until Black

The sun had already set on the wintry Saturday afternoon when Pete Voorhees parked his shiny new Cadillac in front of Ted's Photographers' Supply shop on the outskirts of Redemption. Some citizens of the small Tennessee mountain community believed that Jacques Mandé Daguerre himself had stopped by the store in 1840 to demonstrate his newly developed camera. But most doubted it. The God-fearing people of the town agreed that the building itself was old, maybe the oldest still standing in America, and that those who dared venture into it often met with a mysterious and fatal end. But most doubted it. In any case, the townspeople gave it a wide berth, isolating it from their fairy tale little community as if it were a malodorous, moldering outhouse in the backyard of a dark Appalachian Mountain log

cabin.

The bulky, forty-year-old ex-banker exited his car just as Ted Wilkins, the hereditary, and seemingly ageless, owner of the shop, was hanging the "Closed" sign in his window. He cautiously crossed the icy pavement and knocked on the door. Ted rubbed a port in the condensation on his window to see his last customer of the day, and nodded recognition. He reversed his "Closed" sign, and opened the door.

"Hi, Ted," Pete said as he entered the store, blowing warm vapor on his cold, cupped hands. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner."

"No problem. I'm here to do business. I hear the jury acquitted you of the embezzlement charges."

"It's easy 'to do the crime and not do the time' when you have the right lawyer," he replied with a sinister smile. "Do you have any polycontrast paper? I have some wedding pictures I absolutely need to print tonight. Customer wants them at nine tomorrow, no excuses accepted."

"Looks like your hobby has become a source of profit," the old shopkeeper nodded. He rubbed his hand over his chin in thought a

moment, then explained, shaking his head, "I wish I did, but I'm sold out until Monday. Can you wait until then?"

"No. I have to drop off the pictures tomorrow. What else do you have that I can use?"

"Donno. Take a look on the back shelf in the storeroom. I keep the poor sellers there, and you might find something you can use."

Pete zigzagged between the stands of photographic equipment, through the open door in the back of the room, and into the dimly lit storeroom. He scanned the dusty equipment and crumbling boxes that lined the sagging wooden shelves until a new box on an upper shelf caught his eye. He pulled it down and examined its dustless black cover. He had never heard of "Destin," but its advertisement printed in large gold, Gothic letters on the front of the box, was simple: "Nothing documents life's events better than our unique product."

Centered below the caption was a white, blank, photographic sheet with arrows radiating from its sides to photographs of a birth, a family gathering at Christmas, a wedding, and a question mark. Pete presumed the latter was supposed to represent any other use the buyer

could think of.

"Who is 'Destin'?" he asked as he reentered the shop, turning and examining the box in his hands.

"Is that still there?" Ted replied with a shrug. "Humph. I could have sworn I sold the last box a month ago. I don't know what it is. It came with the store. It's been there for years and **it** doesn't expire for some time. Rather unusual for a print paper. I can give you a good price if you want to try it, with the usual guarantee, of course. If it doesn't do the job, return it for a full refund."

"What the hell," he said, putting the box on the counter and pulling a billfold from his pants' pocket. "If it's no good, I'll just tell my clients that they'll have to wait an extra few days."

Pete left the shop with his purchase under his arm, and Ted again hung his "Closed" sign in the window.

"Destin," he mumbled a few minutes later as he climbed the rickety stairs to a disused laundry room he had rented and then converted into a reasonably comfortable darkroom. "I'm a novice in this business, but I should have heard of this company. I guess it tried to compete with

Kodak and failed. At least it's not expensive," he said as he opened the door and turned on the light.

He put the box on a counter next to a pile of film negative preservers. "Those wedding negatives should be in here," he said as he picked up a few sheets and flipped through them.

"Yes, here they are," he said, relieved by his find. He pulled the plastic sheet with its rows of safely stored negatives from the pack.

The sooner I start, the sooner I get home, he told himself.

After filling the developing and fixing trays with their solutions and checking his photo enlarger, he turned off the light, opened the package of Destin photographic paper and removed the directions and resealed the box.

"It uses the same development times as regular paper," he mumbled as he read the processing instructions under the safelight. He mounted the first negative in the enlarger and focused it on its base.

"This is a great picture of the groom getting out of the limousine," he said contentedly as he examined the image. "They'll love it!"

He cropped it to cut out unwanted background distractions, placed a sheet of photographic paper onto the easel, exposed it, and then slipped it into the crystal clear developing solution. Under the safelight he could see a small form take shape, but it was not the groom or his car.

"What the --" Pete exclaimed in disbelief. He rinsed the paper, put it into the fixer, and sixty seconds later turned on the room light. Instead of a wedding scene, it was a blurry image of an infant held in the arms of a young woman whose upper body had been cut from the picture. She was dressed in clothes of a half a century ago, and "21 December 1966" was printed on the bottom of the photograph.

"What the heck is this? I was born on that date. But where did this print come from? Who is that baby? And the woman?"

With more questions than answers running through his mind, he returned to the enlarger and rechecked the negative. It still showed a groom stepping out of a limousine. He turned off the room light, and, under the red safety lamp, placed another sheet of Destin paper onto the easel. He exposed it to the same negative, and developed it as he had done

hundreds of times in the past.

This time a picture of a young boy stealing a box of candy from a store appeared on the glossy paper. Even from the side, he recognized himself as the subject of the photograph. He was confused and frightened. *Destin*, he wondered. *Destiny*?

He began to sweat in the cold room as he placed another sheet of print paper directly into the darkening developer without exposing it under the enlarger. He watched aghast as a teenage boy in an old car driving away from the scene of a fatal accident gradually appeared in the dark solution.

"My God! There was no one there at the time of the accident," he yelled. "No one could have known I ran over that child! *No one took this picture!* I swear it!"

He was now sweating profusely and his stomach cramped. Without hesitation, but with shaking hands, he slid another sheet of paper into the darkening developer. This time a jury foreman was reading a verdict in a courthouse packed with townspeople. It was his trial and, although guilty, he was acquitted of the charge of embezzling funds from his bank. A guttural sound escaped from his lips as he fell back

against the table behind him.

"Impossible! This is not real! I must be dreaming!" he protested weakly. He was dizzy and his legs struggled to support him. He felt his heart pounding, but its beat was irregular, as if it were struggling to free itself from the tightening grasp of an invisible hand intending to crush it into silence.

He turned on the room light, picked up the black box, and carefully read every word on each of its panels. Apart from the usual technical data, there was nothing to explain what was happening in his darkroom that night. He reviewed the pictures he had developed and, apart from the one of him as an infant which he could not remember, realized that they were reproductions of real events in his life, as if a miniature camera had somehow entered his brain and photographed his memory cells.

He hung the pictures on a rack to dry, and then picked up the black box. He wanted to destroy it, or at least to seal it so that he could never again access its pearly white sheets, but an invisible energy was irresistibly forcing him to remove its top. He extracted another sheet and slipped it into the still-darkening solution.

After a minute, the picture that floated to

the surface of the now almost black solution revealed a young man with a pretty woman. It was he with the latest of the many women he had had affairs with during his five-year marriage to a pretty, bright young woman he abused, physically and mentally, almost from the day he married her.

He pulled the stool from under his workbench and sat gingerly on its front edge. His hand shook as he reached for the last sheet of paper in the box. Under the red light of the darkroom it was blank, as all the others had been. He turned on the room light to examine the photographic paper more closely, hoping that the bright white light would overexpose it, ruining whatever mystery it held. The front was blank and smooth and slippery to the touch, as was the rear, except for the words, "Destin, 1620," which were printed in faint, large Gothic letters in the middle of the sheet.

He slowly turned the paper over and over in his hands, frightened but intrigued by what it might contain. At last, with deep misgivings, but under the pressure of that invisible, cold hand guiding his, he slowly slid the sheet into now jet black developer. The sheet immediately darkened.

Ha! I win, he thought as he looked at the ruined image. *I knew it! The light destroyed whatever was there.* But then he watched in horror as the black paper slowly began to lighten though tones of gray into a startlingly clear image of a woman leaning over a dead man lying on the floor of a darkroom. It was his wife. "10:30 pm, 23 August 2006," was printed along the bottom border of the photograph.

He looked at his watch before grabbing his chest and slumping to the floor.

"It's 10:29," he mumbled before closing his eyes.

* * * *

A week later, in Ted's Photographers' Supply shop, Joe Peterson, a local lawyer famous for his ability to manipulate juries into believing whatever he needed them to believe to get a "Not Guilty" verdict for his clients, was talking to Ted Wilkins.

"Did you hear?" he asked the old shopkeeper. "Pete Voorhees died. When he didn't come home for supper, his wife went looking for him and found him dead in his darkroom. They say he had a heart attack. What

a shame. The wedding pictures hanging on his drying rack were the most beautiful I've ever seen."

"Some people thought justice was served," Ted replied, scratching the white stubble on his deeply lined, leathery face. "It was hard for the honest citizens in this town to accept that the jury found him innocent, even though everyone knew he had embezzled all that money. I guess when you're as good a lawyer as you are, you can get anyone off the hook."

"I'm not only good, I'm the best," Joe boasted, thumping his chest like a silverback gorilla. "It's easy to fool, befuddle, and cheat honest men, whether they're on the jury or not. There isn't a rapist, pedophile, killer, or bank robber that I haven't got off in the past twenty years."

"Doesn't it bother you that these bad people are walking the streets and might continue to harm innocent people?" Ted asked as he rubbed his gnarly, rheumatic hands together.

"Only if they were walking the streets *and* had not paid me for their freedom," he laughed. "That won't happen, though, since I

collect my fees up-front. Do you have any polycontrast paper?"

"I wish I did, but I'm sold out until Monday. Can you wait until then?"

"No. What else do you have?"

"Donno. Take a look on the back shelf in the storeroom. I keep the poor sellers there, and you might find something you can use."

Cloned Spirit

“Come on, come on! Damn! What a place to run out of gas.” Bill Sciocco angrily pounded his fist against his steering wheel, then coaxed his old blue Chevy to the shoulder of the road. *I should have checked the gauge after that sleepy gas station attendant told me he had filled my tank*, he thought. It was the middle of the night on a deserted stretch of country road, hours from when the sun would begin its slow, steady climb into the eastern sky. He turned off his jalopy’s engine as it sputtered its last breath, stepped out of it, and leaned against its dented front fender.

"This is God's country. Maybe He's got gas," the tall, muscular, forty-year-old ex-football player said sarcastically as he looked around for signs of life. Off to the right, a quarter mile down the road, he saw lights

flickering through the trees. *But there can't be*, he thought. He was certain that the attendant had told him that the next town was fifty miles away, yet he had driven less than ten.

Maybe, just maybe, if it's not a nighttime mirage -does that even exist? - there is a gas station there, he hoped as he walked briskly towards the lights. Five minutes later he passed a dozen cars parked on a patch of dirt. A heavy chain separated them from the narrow road that led into the village. In the flickering lights of gas lampposts, the vehicles were old and rusting. Bill climbed over the chain and walked the curving dirt path with two narrow tracks three feet apart running down its center. Plain wooden buildings, each identical in size and design to its neighbor, lined both sides of the street, as if a single architect with little imagination had designed the entire town.

Wind rustled the leaves on the branches of the tall oak trees along the road. *Leaves in March?* he wondered as he approached a barn with a tin roof and shuttered windows. The tracks ended at its wide door. He tugged at the oversized iron padlock hanging from a latch on its right side, but it held fast.

He continued walking the still deserted

road, stopping in front of a wide building with a false front, typical of saloons in old west towns. He pushed open its door and entered into the 19th century. Women wearing bell-shaped skirts, gored to fit smoothly over their hips, their bodices marked by large leg-o-mutton sleeves, waltzed with men in white tie and tailcoats over heavily starched and pleated, white dress shirts.

A masquerade party? he wondered as an attractive middle-aged woman, her hair in high, neat chignons with soft curls at the front, walked towards him.

"May I help you?" she asked in a voice he thought had a "spider to the fly" ring to it. Her nipped waist outfit, bared **at** the chest and arms, created a voluptuous hourglass effect.

"Er, yes," he replied. He glanced quickly around the room. People were staring, almost hungrily, at him, and it made him nervous.

"I ran out of gas down the road, and I wondered if there's a gas station here," he explained, returning to his hostess.

"No, there isn't. We have no contact with anything outside our village. Our religion doesn't permit it," she said with a smile.

"Doesn't permit what, miss, missus...?" he asked, rubbing an eyebrow.

“Galafira Lupei. Among other things, murder. We believe that man was born to kill, and that only a very rigid education from birth will teach him that there are better ways to solve life’s problems than to murder your opponent.

“Unfortunately the rest of the world, which pretends to be civilized, disagrees with our beliefs. So we have created our own world in this chosen land. Mr...?”

“Bill Sciocco.”

“Bill, would you like to taste our punch?” Galafira asked. She flicked a finger to one of the dancers, who immediately ladled a reddish liquid into a tall silver goblet and brought it to them.

“No, really. I have to drive, and if— —“

“It’s non alcoholic. Our religion prohibits that also,” she insisted, handing him the ornate vessel. Bill took it, sniffed its contents, then drained it quickly.

“Not bad,” he said, raising the empty cup in a toast to his hostess before handing it back to the dancer.

“So you never leave this place? Ever?” he asked, wiping the slightly bitter liquid from his lips.

The music had ended, and elegantly,

foppishly, dressed participants were now encircling them. A few pointed at him, then brought their fingers to their lips and stared at him, as if they were judging a victim rather than a guest. Others nodded repeatedly before putting their heads together and murmuring unintelligible phrases to each other. His palms started to sweat. He knew he was powerless to defend himself against that number of people. *Would they let me leave?* he wondered.

“We have no need to leave here. We have ample land to grow our crops and raise our livestock. Our lake is stocked with fish, there is housing for everyone, and most of all, this is a pleasant, safe, environment in which to live and raise a family. The few necessities we can’t produce ourselves, we order from a man who arrives at the chain once a week. Barter works well for us. We exchange our handmade goods for what we buy.”

“But there is a parking lot full of cars just outside the chain at the entrance to this village,” he protested weakly. “Who do they belong to?”

“I have no knowledge of what happens outside of here. I, or one of our group, fl...er, walk the perimeter of our land every night. If you say there are cars, then there are, but they

are not ours. We use a horse and buggy to trade goods at our borders.” She raised the corners of her heavily painted lips as if she had intended to smile, but stopped midway between a thin line of dislike and the parted lips of flirtatiousness.

“We do not readily welcome guests to our coterie of friends,” she continued, “but since you are here, please, join us on the one night of the year we are allowed to socialize until dawn. There is food in the rear of the room— —“

“Thank you, but I can’t stay,” he interrupted. “I have an important meeting in Antonito, so I must find transportation, or gasoline, and be on my way.”

“As you wish,” Galafira replied with a smile that faded quickly. She spread her arms and the dandified congregation that had surrounded them, opened a corridor that led to the door.

“Thank you again,” Bill said before turning and walking the gantlet to the exit. The revelers, instead of waving whips and clubs as he feared, nodded a stern approval, as if he were a steer going to slaughter. Despite his overpowering, unexplained fear of an imminent attack against him, no one made an attempt to block his exit from the old building, nor to harm

him in any way. But even so, panic permeated his pores.

So, what is this place? An evil theme park of some sort? he wondered as he exited the building. Once outside, he felt dizzy and disoriented. None of the buildings seemed to be where they were when he arrived. He held his head between shaking hands, waiting for the dizziness to pass. A minute later he started walking the dirt road, but instead of returning the way he entered the village, he unknowingly walked in the opposite direction, not noticing the saloon that stood in juxtaposition to a church with a three story high steeple, nor the blacksmith shop with a fire burning in a pit just inside its entrance.

Bill shrugged blindly at the last building on the street as two bats slowly circled him, then continued on their way. He turned back, hoping to find the parked cars, visible to the entire world, he somehow remembered, but not to the inhabitants of this odd village. Twenty yards down the road two men were gesticulating wildly and arguing loudly, but he did not remember passing them, nor could he understand the reason for the discussion since it seemed to be in a foreign language. The older of

the two, leaning heavily on his cane, was waving a fist in his opponent's face. As Bill walked towards them, the younger man looked in his direction, then stormed away.

The wizened old man was bent over so far, his narrow chest was parallel to the ground. "Hello," he said in a weak voice. He cocked his head up to see Bill's chest. "My neighbor thought he should be the one to tell you about our town, but 'age before age,' as we say here. My name is Ion Bănescu, and I'm ninety-nine-years old. The age limit here is one hundred, so since time is running out for me, I insisted I be the one to tell you about our little--"

"Galafira already told me about it," Bill interrupted impatiently. "I must find a gas station and get back on the road."

"There aren't any around here, but we wouldn't tell you even if there were," Ion explained cynically. His skeleton hand shook rhythmically on his cane, burrowing its copper tip into the dirt like the bit on a drill.

"There's only one way out of here, and Galafira won't ever tell you what it is."

"Will you?" Bill asked as his dizziness slowly abated.

"Nope. Make it to a hundred, and you'll

see for yourself,” he sniggered. “Few ever do, however, since we sometimes get a second chance much sooner. Unfortunately we’ve had a bad few years, not of our doing, and we lost a few of our members.

“You look to be in good shape, at least up to your chest,” Ion continued. “This neck of mine won’t let me see any higher.”

“I work out a few days a week,” he said impatiently. “In any case, Ion, I must go— —“

“I’d like to show you something,” the old man said. “Follow me,” he ordered in a flebile voice. He trudged slowly down the narrow street between the church and the nondescript building across from it. After a few steps, he stopped and turned, and seeing that Bill’s chest had not moved in his direction, said, “Time is running out, so please....”

“Alright, five minutes is all I can give you,” Bill replied, throwing up his hands, “then I really have to leave.”

“They’ll be enough,” he snickered, continuing along the alley.

The two men walked to a small building behind the church; its clean lines and brick walls were out of place in a town filled with old wooden buildings. Ion rapped his cane gently

on the door. It opened immediately and a faint chemical odor escaped darkened room them.

“What is this place?” Bill asked. He sensed danger and as he quickly turned to leave, two husky men came up behind him and forced him into the room. He fought ferociously to free himself from their grasp, slamming one into a wall and swinging the other to the ground, until he was clubbed unconscious.

Sometime later, Bill awoke to find himself in a brightly lit room. His wrists and ankles were strapped to a table, and a thick leather band bound his chest and upper arms. Unfamiliar machinery sat alongside flasks and test tubes on nearby marble-topped tables. Next to him, Ion Bănescu rested on a table a foot lower than his. He was not strapped down.

A flimsy red mask partially covered the nose and beard of the man standing between them. A long white coat, marked with streaks of what appeared to be blood, stretched tightly over his globular abdomen.

“You almost didn’t make it, Ion,” the man chided in an accent from an eastern European country. “You know the rules, your hundredth birthday is an absolute deadline. One more day and your VNA would have been

converted into mulch.” He laughed and shook his head. “And from the looks of you, it would be the worst we’ve ever had. I’d bet that even the moonlight would ignite it. I don’t know how you even made it past fifty with all the drinking and drugs you’ve done.”

The technician chuckled and turned to Bill. “This won’t hurt,” he promised as tied a tourniquet around his bicep. He stuck a needle into the vein that bulged in his lower arm a moment later, filled several test tubes of blood, and then released the tourniquet.

“It’s not clotting,” he said approvingly, holding them up to the light. “So far, so good.”

He added a few drops of different colored liquids to each of the test tubes, then placed them inside a large black instrument and closed the door. He turned a dial on its face, and leaned against the workbench as the whirling sound from inside the machine slowly increased to a high pitch. It shut down after a few minutes, and the technician removed the test tubes and held them up to the light. He again nodded his satisfaction, and turned to his patients.

“You are lucky, Ion,” he said, patting the old man on his wasted arm. “This blood is not

clotting. It has not been contaminated by man's recent foolishness. God is giving you another chance, even though you didn't deserve the last three." He shook his head in disgust, then turned to Bill.

"You, sir," he said as politely as the circumstances would allow, "are not as lucky. Your perspicacity saved you from one death, but not from another." He retied the tourniquet around Bill's bicep. "You won't feel any pain, aside from this needle," he explained as its point pierced his captive's forearm but failed to enter his vein.

"No, wait!" Bill shouted, understanding the lightly veiled threat to his existence. Veins popped out in his neck as he strained vainly to break loose from his bonds. "You don't kill people, that's what Galafira told me!"

"Our Romanian princess, who hails from the center of the country, which you might know as Transylvania, spoke the truth. In a few minutes you will leave your present shell which would wither and die in a few years anyway, and you will be reborn in Ion Bănescu. It is you that will govern how he spends the next sixty years. You are forty, correct? It is on your driver's license we found in your wallet."

“Yes, but please! You don’t understand. I don’t want to live as Ion’s guardian angel, or whatever your religion would call me. I believe in a God who loves me for himself. He doesn’t want to share me with other gods. He’ll be very angry with yours!”

The technician laughed. “That is the best plea for salvation I’ve ever heard. But you’ll like living an eternal existence here. No disease, no expensive health insurance premiums or unnecessary visits by incompetent, money hungry, doctors. No death, no taxes. Not much of anything unpleasant actually. Dancing in the costume of the week, hanging from rafters in the barn, community picnics, night flights into neighboring towns. That sort of stuff will fill your days and nights, maybe for eternity. Stay away from the sun, and garlic and crucifixes, and you’ll be fine.”

After a third attempt to insert the needle into a vein in Bill’s arm, blood began to flow freely into the tubing to which it was attached.

“Ah, success, finally. I would have thought it easier,” the technician boasted.

He clamped the tube and inserted the needle on its other end into Ion’s arm. He aspirated the treated blood from the test tubes

and injected it onto the line going into Ion before unclamping the tourniquet. Blood flowed quickly down into Ion's arm from Bill's.

"But, but...I'm a teetotaler..." were the last words Bill, now much paler than before he stumbled into the Vampire's Coven, uttered. His body made one clonic movement before he closed his eyes forever.

"Stop!" Ion yelled to the technician. "I can't live as a teetotaler! Clamp the tube!"

But it was too late. The treated and tested blood had already begun its transformation. Ion groaned, stretched, and turned convulsively on his table while the transfusion began his transformation from a crippled old man to a young, healthy one. His back straightened and the girth of his sinewy arms and legs took on a new dimension.

Although he was centuries old, forty-year-old Ion Bănescu, now tall and muscular, rose from his table. He respectfully shook the hand of the technician. He knew he would need him again in sixty years, and didn't want to disrespect him.

"I can't live without a nip or two between transfusions," he complained bitterly. "Vampires cannot live by blood alone!"

“You certainly can,” the technician disagreed with a hearty laugh. “A tisana of Russian tarragon will help you over the rough spots. And besides, you shouldn’t drink and fly. It worked fine when we recently couldn’t drink the blood of the millions of vaccinated people walking the earth because it caused clotting in our wings, and it will work now.”

Ion nodded, unconvinced. “Harrumph! I’ll try,” he said before quickly leaving the laboratory.

It was Monday and the bars were open until midnight in a nearby town. *I might be able to get one more drink in me before Bill takes over*, Ion thought as he raced home before the sun turned his Coven into an apparently abandoned village.

The Author

Raymond C. Andrews is an American born physician who graduated from the University of Bologna Medical School in Italy in 1970. After training in general surgery, neurosurgery, and aerospace medicine, he accepted the position as an emergency room director in a New Jersey hospital.

In the late 1970s he entered private practice in California and later wrote a popular series of articles on health care for the Bakersfield *Californian*. Other articles and comments of his have appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Bergen Record*, and *Private Practice*. While in practice he developed "Drop-in-Laboratory Services" to make access to medical care easier and less costly for the migrant workers that were a large portion of his patients.

Lured back to Italy by medieval castles

and the opera at *La Scala* in 1984, Dr. Andrews worked ten years for the state health system. He also was one of the first physicians to participate in the then newly established Italian 911 emergency hot line system.

After twenty-five years of medical practice on two continents, and with the regrettable certainty that patient care has taken a backseat to bureaucracy and to the questionable tactics of some of his colleagues both here and abroad, in 1995 he accepted a position with the United States Public Health Service and was a director of a Navajo clinic on their reservation in northeastern Arizona. He was also director of the clinic's Emergency Medical Services, and a director of the National Native American Emergency Medical Services Association.

Dr. Andrews is retired and passes his time writing, building model ships, and driving his modified Jeep and camper in the western United States.